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ABSTRACT

Before charging blindly into the issues of implementing educational choice programs, states and local districts need to stop and think about direction for efforts to improve and restructure education. Recent research shows that the most successful choice systems are tailored to their community's needs. Among the plans that have been implemented are alternative schools, charter schools, and magnet schools. Variations in the impacts of these programs on students suggest that many factors affect how school choice systems "play out." When developing policies to implement choice systems, policymakers should consider elements of context (demographics) and organizational traits of the schools involved (school climate). In making decisions about systems of choice, questions to be raised include: What are the goals for education in one's state? and What are the costs related to systems of choice? Examples of legislation on choice in Arkansas, Colorado, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Oklahoma are included. (15 references) (EJS)

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Educational Choice — Thinking it Through

Educational policy appears to be moving toward public school choice with the vision of a charging rhino. And the results could be just as dramatic. Before lunging into the issues of implementing choice programs, states and local districts need to stop and think about where they are going in their efforts to improve and restructure education. By charging nearsightedly at choice, policymakers risk missing the issue — improving schools.

"The goal is not to accept a choice plan," says Frank Newman, president of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), "but to bring about a set of forces naturally to create exciting schools." Choice is one tool for leveraging that process. And the real goal in implementing choice systems, concludes New Jersey Governor Thomas H. Kean, "has to be to give local schools the power to help themselves."

Options for choice

How states and local policymakers are to use choice for this purpose depends on (1) the mix of contextual characteristics peculiar to each state and district and (2) organizational characteristics of the schools involved. Across the country, school districts operate a variety of choice systems. And they can describe different impacts — some positive, some negative. Recent research shows that the most successful are tailored to the needs of their communities. Among the plans being tried are **alternative schools, charter schools, magnet schools, educational clinics, interdistrict plans, intradistrict plans, postsecondary options, schools within schools, "second chance" programs, tax credits, and vouchers**. And as much as they vary in name and style, they also vary in their impact on students and the systems themselves. For example:

- In selective magnet programs in Prince George's County, Maryland and Austin, Texas, students show increases in achievement.
- In selective magnet programs in New York City and Chicago, students who are unsuccessful in competing for schools of their choice may be assigned to non-selective schools in their own neighborhoods. Such default placement tends disproportionately to affect at-risk youth.
- In intradistrict, controlled-choice plans in Montclair, New Jersey and Cambridge, Massachusetts, districts have no "neighborhood" schools. All schools are magnets with different subject focuses or instructional approaches from which families select. Parents are engaging in substantive, ongoing participation.
- In Lowell, Massachusetts, a similar plan has reported heavy costs, especially for coordinating transportation.
- Under an intradistrict plan in East Harlem's Central District #4, teachers and staff established schools-within-schools when 85% of students were reading below grade level. Two-thirds of the students now read at or above grade level.
- Alternative schools such as Florida's School for Applied Individualized Learning (SAIL) create smaller or more personal "learning environments" for students. In 1986-87, SAIL students demonstrated four times the improvement in reading of students in traditional schools.

Such variation suggests that many factors in-

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teract to affect how choice "plays out" in a given school or district. The ECS guide, ***Policymaker's Guidebook to Public School Choice,*** discusses the impact of different models of choice. Although there is no experimental research that tells us which models work best under what conditions, there is evidence to suggest that policymakers consider the local context and the organizational traits of the schools when developing policies to implement systems of choice.

Elements of context include:

- State and local goals for school improvement and the presence or absence of other efforts
- Existing policies, rules, or regulations that support or impede local efforts to restructure schools
- Tax structures and funding formulas
- Demographics
- Options and constraints inherent in facilities and infrastructure (e.g., number of schools in a district; availability of public transportation)
- The nature of "players" such as students, parents, teachers, administrators, business and community leaders, and policymakers

Organizational traits include:

- The school climate
- Sense of purpose and community within the school
- Level of autonomy and flexibility for teachers and students in defining their own roles and making decisions
- Existing structures and processes that facilitate or impede cooperative planning and decisionmaking
- Opportunities for engaging parents in planning and decisionmaking

Steps for decisionmaking

Decisionmakers must sift through this complex mix of influences to select the elements of policies that will truly help expand educational choice within their states and districts and stimulate school improvement. No one model is best for all, and just because a model works in one context does not mean it will be appropriate in another. Decisionmakers must examine closely the various options before them. Research and effective practice suggest raising the following questions:

1. *What are the goals for education in your state? Which systems of choice support those goals in the state and in local communities? "The most effective choice programs belong to communities," says Robert Peterkin, former superintendent in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

- Decide which type of choice plans support state/local educational goals.
- Consider whether the state should equalize funding among districts and reduce reliance on local property taxes.
- Provide continuing oversight and correction.
- Consider whether choice programs should be used as a means for district reorganization.
- Examine policies to enable local schools to create diverse programs.
- Examine the relationship between public and private school systems.

2. *What are the costs related to systems of choice?*

- Time and resources for localities to plan the system.
- Time and resources for planning and coodinating a transportation system.
- Costs of coordinating and regulating information dissemination.
- Staff development for retraining (e.g., if a school closes and reopens as a specialty school or if a school needs trained bilingual faculty).
- Time, staff development, and technical assistance to school staff to develop programs or new processes.
- Technical assistance to schools experiencing transfers under inter- and intradistrict plans.

3. *How do we address ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic equity? States in the Southwestern Region must consider the impact of systems of choice on families in rural communities and children from non-English language background families.*

- Establish fair and legal policies regarding student assignment, transfer, and appeals.
- Protect ongoing desegregation efforts.

- Fund some transportation, especially for low-income families, e.g., by using state or federal "pass-through" monies.
- Consider ways to contain transportation costs, e.g, options to expand choice within local schools.
- Consider impact of choice options on child care patterns, i.e., transportation of children attending school in a district away from their usual after-school care providers.
- Consider whether to regulate participation in extracurricular activities to control recruiting among districts.
- Ensure that trained bilingual education teachers are available for students from non-English language backgrounds.
- Help local districts manage the impact of choice, especially small, rural ones. Consider a financial cushion to such districts during the program's first year.
- Fund research on the effects of systems of choice on at-risk students.

4. *How do we inform, educate, and engage parents so they can participate in the choice process? "The districts that do well are ones that commit resources to this," says Owen Heleen of the Institute for Responsive Education.*

- Continually survey parent priorities and assess the system.
- Fund an effective system of family information, outreach, counseling,and personal assistance; e.g., counsel youngsters in decisiomaking; fund part-time district/regional liaisons.
- Get information into communities: zoos, clinics, laundromats, grocery stores, public-housing projects, libraries, etc.
- Regulate or enable local districts to regulate information dissemination and advertising about programs.
- Fund research on how parents make choices, especially, low-income, minority, or non-English-speaking parents.

5. *How does choice fit into the state's existing efforts for school improvement? What procedures will make non-selective "neighborhood" schools effective schools for the students and staff who remain there?*

- Clearly articulate skills and knowledge all students are expected to develop.
- Develop a system of monitoring and reporting transfers to schools under inter- and intradistrict plans.
- Provide technical assistance to schools experiencing transfers.
- Provide planning, inservice training, and program development funds to teachers and principals to plan and improve programs in response to state guidelines and parent priorities.
- Grant waivers to allow educators to create schools and programs that "depart from traditional rules and regulations."
- Provide staff development funds and technical assistance for principals and teachers to learn/practice site-based decisionmaking.
- Fund pilot programs to research the effects of organizational structures and processes on schools and systems of choice.

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Legislation on Choice in the Southwestern Region

In the Southwest, many districts already have inter- or intradistrict arrangements. Some state legislatures have examined choice. Below are profiles of selected legislative proposals highlighting admissions, equity, extracurricular activities, funding, school improvement, and transportation.

	ARKANSAS	COLORADO	LOUISIANA
Name	Arkansas Public School Choice Act of 1989 (SB 56).	HB 1109/SB 119.	School Redesign Plan, a pilot project in East Baton Rouge Parish.
Scope	Voluntary interdistrict program in which students could attend the public school of their choice.	Voluntary inter- and intradistrict proposal (HB 1109); "charter schools" (SB 119).	Twelve elementary, middle, and high schools of choice out of the parish's 102 schools.
Admissions/Equity	Transfer must not adversely affect the desegregation of the sending and receiving districts.	Transfers must preserve racial, ethnic balance (HB 1109); if applications to charter schools exceed available space, assignment by lottery (SB 119).	Resident students may apply to any of the special schools, if the transfer does not disturb the desegregation balance.
Funding	State aid would follow student.	Participating districts could not charge tuition for non-resident students (HB 1109).	
School Improvement		Establishes competitive grants programs for teachers and other staff (HB 1109).	Each of the 12 schools has a special programmatic focus. Site-based management is a characteristic of the schools.
Extracurricular Activities	Ineligible to participate in interscholastic athletics for one year from the date of transfer.		
Information System		Schools must develop parent outreach/communications plan (SB 119).	
Transportation	Parents responsible from home to nearest border of receiving district; may request receiving district to transport child from nearest border to school of choice. If family income is at or below the poverty level, parents could be reimbursed.	Parents responsible; low-income families could apply for transportation funds from federal monies (HB 1109/SB 119).	Provided by the parish.
Contact	Kathy Van Laningham, Staff Liaison for Education, Office of the Governor, State Capitol, Little Rock, AR 72201; 501/682-2345	Ken Salazar, Legal Advisor to the Governor, Office of the Governor, State Capitol, Denver, CO 80203; 303/866-2471	Mary Ellen Jordan, Coordinator of School Redesign and Instruction; P.O. Box 2950, Baton Rouge, LA 70821; 504/922-5449

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	NEW MEXICO	OKLAHOMA	TEXAS
Name	The Family Enrollment Options Act of 1989 (SB 545).	Parental Choice Act (S.B. 158).	As this issue of *Insights* goes to press, the Texas Legislature had not proposed bills related to public school choice.
Scope	Voluntary inter- and intradistrict; students may apply to schools or programs in their own or other districts.	Interdistrict plan which would permit students to transfer to any school outside their own district.	Many local districts in Texas, however, have magnet schools with special curricular emphases.
Admissions/Equity	Approval of sending and receiving districts based on available spaces and resources. Applications are not judged on the basis of prior academic achievement, athletic or other extra-curricular activities, disabilities, proficiency in English or prior discipline problems.	Approval of the receiving district.	
Funding	State aid follows the student.	State aid, which is only two-thirds of pupil cost, would follow the student.	
Extracurricular Activities	State Board of Education rules on athletic transfer apply.	No participation in intramural activities for one year after the transfer.	
Information System	Participating districts must provide information about the district, schools, resources and programs.		
Transportation	Parents responsible from home to the border of non-resident district; may request non-resident district to transport child within that district. In interdistrict plans, poverty-level families reimbursed by non-resident district; in intradistrict plans by resident district.	Parents responsible to the border of the receiving district; the receiving district would be responsible for transportation within its boundaries.	
Contact	Marlis Mann, Education Advisor to the Governor, State Capitol Building, Santa Fe, NM 87503; 505/827-3000	Bill Thoms, Senior Legislative Analyst, Rm 309, State Capitol, Oklahoma City, OK 73105; 405/524-0126	

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